

# Gender Equality Manifested in the Selected Works of the Bahá'í Faith Leaders: Implications on Peace Advocacy

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**Abstract** - *Today, the discrimination women face is just one of the many signs of a world in a deplorable state. Countless contemporary social institutions, structures and practices have been set up in a manner that stimulates inequalities and people functioning within these practices face systematic restrictions and challenges. In order to overcome these challenges and realize the fundamental truth of gender equality practiced in real life, it is essential for humankind to redefine the roles of women and men as well as the relationships between them in the family, workplace, community, and public institutions' setting. Thus, this qualitative study aimed to trace the historic beginnings of Bahá'í Faith, to determine the manifestations of gender equality in the works of selected Bahá'í Faith leaders and their implications on peace advocacy. Findings of the analysis revealed that the Bahá'í Faith is the youngest of the world's religions which stemmed originally from Shi'ite Islam in Iran in the mid-19th century. It was founded by Bahá'u'lláh who was recognized by the Bahá'í followers as the last prophet sent by God following Muhammad. Three fundamental principles govern the Bahá'í Faith namely: Unity of God, Unity of Religion and Unity of Mankind. These three assertions formed the principal core of the Bahá'í religion and are supplemented by other tenets namely: universal compulsory education, universal auxiliary language to support one's native language, universal peace, harmony of science and religion and many others. Moreover, the Baha'i Faith followers claim to regard the equality of men and women as one of its fundamental tenets. No other world religion has been quite as explicit as the Bahá'í faith in its support of the principle of the gender equality. The Baha'is respect the distinction of either gender's capabilities and potentials, enabling them to fulfill different but complementary roles. They likewise recognize the contributory role of women's education in the cessation of war and attainment of world peace.*

**Keywords:** *Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh, Gender Equality, Peace Advocacy*

## INTRODUCTION

The global issue of women's rights might have taken immense strides over the past few decades, but universal cognizance and acceptance sadly remains to be seen. Considered to be a major developmental hindrance to any country's progress, gender inequality brings with it economic and legal issues that contain women to a certain degree, rendering them incapable of contributing to progress.

Bachelet [1] cited that it is imperative for the cause of democracy and justice to include the universal and equal participation of women. Likewise, she stated that the most recent findings of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) is a vital information for people to better understand the geographical, political and cultural

levels of gender discrimination and highlighted the problematic areas that need urgent attention. While some areas have displayed promising results, gender discrimination remains a global issue, according to Alvarez [2], who concluded that legal policies that can assure an empowered community of economic improvement are needed to combat socioeconomic injustice and discrimination.

Data from SIGI successfully pinpointed a glaring fact: that nations with highly marked levels of discrimination versus its women are significantly poor performers on developmental indices that include female job opportunities, labor force inclusions, secondary education and child/maternal morbidity and mortality ratio.

To date, widespread practices of gender discrimination still come in various forms, usually

putting the women at a disadvantage. According to the 2012 SIGI, 86 out of 121 nations have been found to have policies and laws that discriminate against the women folk, and around 50 percent of the women from the said nations voiced out cries of justified domestic violence in unison. Countries like Mali or Niger, for example, yielded data showing that over 50 percent of their females aged 15 to 19 are already married. This data translates to a glaring practice that proves to be detrimental to women's pursuit for education necessary for the females to be vital cogs in their country's development. The SIGI likewise has highlighted countries from Africa and the Middle East as having significantly high cases and levels of discrimination [3].

Since the SIGI came out in 2009, there had been considerable progress in the stand against gender discrimination. However, victories can be likened to small skirmishes in sparse regions that seem to be fewer and far in between, like for example in Rwanda, South Africa and Morocco where policy reforms have brought about an improvement in the social and legal status of their women; inheritance laws that protect women's claims, Family Code revisions that grant equal rights, and the imposition of quotas or goals that increase the political participation and representation of women. While all those improvements have been successfully implemented in the aforementioned countries, according to SIGI, the rest of the African and Gulf region have yet to follow their lead.

Such is the case in Southeast Asia and Latin America, where the passing of laws that protect women against discrimination have yet to come in full swing. In spite of SIGI reports that detailed some countries performing well on gender indices, some countries in Latin America as well as in Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam and China, for example, represent those nations where gender equality remains as a persistent issue.

Gender inequality has been a long-standing global issue: the United Nations has long-since facilitated the passing of a Universal Human Rights Charter; the 1979 UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; and 1993 saw the inception of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. But in spite of these efforts having been supported by many nations, it is a general fact that to date, women's rights continue to be trampled upon, as discrimination and oppression still haunt the

women of the world. A number of nations have been and are still being led by politicians who use either or both cultural and religious traditions as excuses for downplaying and eroding the universal message of gender equality. Such is the glaring fact: that man still refuses to give up his supposed dominance over woman, and as of late, the situation seems to worsen as all bases seem to have been covered. The women have yet to see a better prospect of having political leaders with the will to fight for women's rights, or even religious authorities who can exemplify a complete and total aversion from the misogyny behind superstition, tradition, and the outright misinterpretation of religious scripture, much to the disadvantage of women. The extent of gender inequality befalling the women of today speaks well of the contemporary indisposition of humanity. Today's social framework reeks of an erratic institutional blueprint that proved to be faulty and set towards the women being unable to overcome society's restraints and challenges.

To achieve the monumental task of gender equality becoming less of a dream and more of a reality, mankind as a whole must feel the definite need for intervention. It needs to accept the fact that there is still room for improvement, and that crucial steps would be necessary toward dismantling gender discrimination at the very core. It needs to subject all outdated and archaic social norms under the lens, and provide a critical analysis aimed at changing the global views that undermine women's rights. It needs the revitalization of the virtues of unity, justice and equality. It needs to appreciate the uniqueness and diversity of capabilities of both men and women, and assign roles that cultivate and foster harmony among them in the greater social perspective. Mankind needs to reevaluate its relationships in consideration with each and every soul's spiritual needs. In order for all of these to be realized, men and women must share an equal and unopposed view toward change for all of these to see complete fruition. Both men and women should turn to spirituality for guiding principles that will aid toward a rebirth of social order into one that exemplifies equality, peace and progress for all.

Examples of religion that were born out of the hub of Western civilization or the Middle East are the monotheistic or non-Trinitarian beliefs or Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the more progressive Bahá'í faith. It is important to note that all four religions coincidentally originated from what the SIGI has

identified as a challenging area in terms of gender equality, with all four faith's tracing its roots to Abraham and his offsprings Ishmael and Isaac [4].

The Bahá'í faith is the youngest of the four Abrahamic religions, having been born out of Islam in Iran in the mid-1800s [5], but has its own identity in the same way Christianity established its identity while tracing its roots to Judaism. The Bahá'í faith recognizes Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and all other faiths in adherence to their core belief of the oneness of humanity, and as of today, around 6 million followers of the Bahá'í faith are scattered all over the world [6].

The faith's founding father Bahá'u'lláh is recognized by the Bahá'í faithful as the last prophet sent by God following Muhammad [7]. Being the most recent of God's messengers that include Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Noah, David, Zoroaster, Christ and Muhammad, Bahá'u'lláh who was born in 1817 claimed that all religions came forth from one God. Thus, the Bahá'ís strongly attest to mankind's nature being deeply rooted to its spiritual needs, and likewise believe in the vision of a united future for humanity, as told in the works of Bahá'u'lláh [8].

Bahá'u'lláh, who was succeeded by Abdu'l-Bahá upon his death in 1892, wrote most of the Bahá'í faith's texts which revolved around the theme of mankind being one, with the innate need to strive toward achieving a unified global society. According to him, God has pre-ordained a succession of historical events to demolish all divisive factors put up by men upon themselves. He believes that the day will come when man will see a civilized society under one God, and it is up to the people to accept the concept of one humanity as a truth in order for the vision to be finally fulfilled.

Abdu'l-Bahá' became the Bahá'í faith's leader upon the death of his father and became the religion's authorized interpreter. He had no formal education save for the learnings he obtained from his father's teachings. He was regarded by the Bahá'ís as an ambassador of social justice, equality and universal peace. Prior to his death in 1921, Abdu'l-Bahá' devoted his life to promulgating and safeguarding the faith of his father, and led a life of exemplary actions that included teachings and writings which revolved around the core message of upholding peace, unity and the spiritual renewal of mankind [8].

The Bahá'í faith has three fundamental assertions called the "three onenesses" where other supplemental

principles revolve: Oneness of God, Religion and Humanity [9]. Also known as the Unity of God, Unity of Religion and Unity of Mankind, these three assertions are explained in the Bahá'í scriptures as the presence of God through a series of prophets or messengers, from which different religions ultimately converge into a single race of a united religion, under one Supreme Deity. Understanding the idea of "Three Onenesses" is essential in understanding Bahá'í beliefs and attitudes toward people of any color or creed. The Bahá'ís are considered to be the second most-widespread independent religion with the Bahá'í literature being successfully translated into over 800 languages [10] due to the faith's openness in accepting every race and culture.

According to Bahá'í writings, men and women must share an equal participation in the advancement toward prosperity and progress. The Bahá'ís believe that men essentially play a vital role in the promotion and protection of gender equality primarily because the greatness of men are dependent upon the women's general well-being. In essence, women's advancement and the fulfillment of women's role in society ceases to be an issue concerning the women alone, as Bahá'í teachings require men to embrace the truth that women are equally important elements in both religion and society, and the greatness of men is hinged upon women's attainment of their highest potentials [11].

The teachings of both Bahá'u'lláh and his son Abdu'l-Bahá cover vast themes that include the Divine Purpose of Revelation, nature and its relationship to the human race, the innate nobility of human spirit, and the cultivation of spiritual attributes, among others. Bahá'í teachings likewise abound with the theme of gender equality and its relationship to humanity's ultimate goal of universal peace.

The importance of engaging in literary analysis can be enumerated based on its relevance to a number of individuals. Hence, it is important to outline how this research can prove to be of significant value to members and managers of the academe, to practicing professionals, to university and college professors, instructors and students of literature, to literary fanatics and aspiring writers who belong to the growing number of social and spiritual theory analysts, to the researcher, and to future researchers alike.

This study may inspire academic members and managers in considering the Bahá'í faith's fundamental

principles as better examples of culture and teachings that offer an abundance of virtues essential to their respective academes. This study may prove to be of great value to working and practicing professionals who may be willing to learn how the usage of language in an emotive context can significantly contribute to the study of gender equality. This study may be able to help the university and college professors and instructors of literature specifically in the application of the appropriate concepts and approaches in literary analysis. This paper can likewise help students to appreciate literature as a notable work of art with a distinct quality of content and form that distinguishes it from other texts, and inspire them to consider literary analysis as a beneficial academic activity. Furthermore, this study may contribute to literature enthusiasts and aspiring writers who belong to the more progressive breed of socially and spiritually principled analysts by virtue of the relationship of spiritual concepts to pedagogical applications aimed at the improvement of society. The researcher may particularly benefit from this paper in the light that it will serve as a modest contribution to the ever-growing body of literature on the Bahá'í faith. Moreover, this study may benefit future researchers as it may serve as a frame of reference in future studies that explore literature as an effective and efficient form of communication.

With these thoughts, the researcher who currently serves as a lecturer in literature at the Batangas State University felt deeply motivated to engage, explore and undertake an analysis of gender equality and its implications on the universal advocacy for peace, as manifested in the selected works of the leaders of the Bahá'í Faith.

#### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

This study analyzed gender equality as manifested in the selected works of the Bahá'í Faith leaders pointing out their implications on peace advocacy. Likewise, this paper tried to present the historic beginnings of the Bahá'í Faith and the manifestations of gender equality in the selections.

#### **METHODS**

**Research Design.** The study employed the qualitative method of research in analyzing gender equality as manifested in the selected works of the Bahá'í Faith leaders and their implications on peace advocacy. Qualitative research is bounded by the

philosophical premise that one must take into consideration the multiple realities experienced by the readers themselves to understand a complex phenomenon, according to Suter [12]. These multiple realities experienced by the readers can be manifested in various ways, including the literary genre referred to as discourses or speeches. Historical and philosophical approaches were used as the bases for analysis.

Human experiences take their meaning from historical, social, cultural, political, and philosophical influences, and are therefore incapable of being disconnected to the said influences, according to Ary et al. [13]. Hence, in analyzing the identified literary works, the principles in the context of being Bahá'í Faith leaders were considered. These provided substantial and significant interpretations of the authors' motivations as regards their principles.

Patton [14] pointed out that the goal of qualitative data analysis is to uncover emerging themes, patterns, concepts, insights, and understanding. Thus, this study also involved textual analysis, which is a systematic technique in analyzing message content and message handling [15]. The data analysis in this research centered on pattern seeking and the extraction of meaning from the identified Bahá'í Faith writers' selected literary narrative or image data.

**Treatment of Materials.** This study was conducted with the researcher considering the essential features in the treatment of materials. As with other art forms, analysis and evaluation of literature are governed by a set of standards. Garcia et al. [16] enumerated attributes of a literature by which it can be evaluated, namely: universality, permanence, suggestiveness, intellectual value, spiritual value, style and, artistry.

Regarding the selected literary pieces' quality of universality, much can be said as regards their being both timely and timeless, as they deal with fundamental truths that apply to elemental feelings under universal conditions, thus appealing to one and all. With reference to the value of permanence, the selected works can be significantly considered enduring and with lasting appeal, allowing them to be read and re-read, discovered and rediscovered, and for all possibility of new discernments and interpretations.

Relative to the value of suggestiveness, the selected literary pieces entice the emotion, introspection and appreciation among other values. Their charm can be appreciated in how the contents of

the selection awaken the consciousness of the readers. In the same manner, the said works also appeal to the intellect, bearing intellectual value that stimulates the thought and gives the readers opportunity to enrich their mental awareness via a realization of nature and life's fundamental truths.

The moral messages within the selections give them their spiritual value. Having the capability to inspire and enrich the readers' moral values are but part of why the selected literature were considered spiritually valuable. As regards the value of style, it is noteworthy to mention that the selections have distinct style characteristics that give a glimpse of how the writers perceive life, interpret life's deepest meanings and express their views through their works.

Finally, with reference to artistry, the selected works were noted to have an aesthetic appeal to the readers, being expressions of life in forms of truth and beauty, remaining inconspicuous until a sensitive and artistic soul presents them to the attention of readers.

Due to their philosophical credibility that may well serve this study, the following literary works were analyzed: Bahá'u'lláh's *Bahá'í Faith and Gender Equality* as well as Abdu'l-Bahá's *Promulgation of Universal Peace, Paris Talks* and *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá*. The previously mentioned selections form the fundamental and twining core of this study. The veracity and meaning of the statements in the selections were carefully chartered and thoroughly subjected to internal and external analysis and criticism. Relative to this, the researcher exercised freedom in utilizing her own views in evaluating each literary piece with reference to the ideological concepts evoked within her consciousness. Likewise, the literary pieces were appraised by defining the suitability of language to the theme, the language's relevance to the situation, and appropriateness of the language to the literary pieces under study. Important lines from the selections served as the primary sources of this study. Analyses and interpretation of the said passages substantiated the core theoretical bases of the study.

Other literary works of the identified Bahá'í Faith leaders, which underscores gender equality were excluded in the study. Likewise, other approaches in literary criticism like cultural and biographical approaches that may be employed were not included in the analysis.

In consideration with the breadth of the Bahá'í Faith, this study is based only on the analysis of one of its twelve principles.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 1. Bahá'í Faith and its Historic Beginnings.

Bahá'í faith was born out of the Shi'ite Muslim faith in Iran in 1844, as proclaimed by a native who took on the name "The Báb". The Shi'ites, or members of the Shia Muslims are considered to be the major sect of Muslims in Iran. The Bab proclaimed that, contrary to the core belief of Islam that Muhammad was the last prophet, another messenger was bound to arrive. This proclamation was of great significance to the founding of the Bahá'í faith, but due to its progressive nature, The Báb and his followers experienced persecution from the rest of the Muslim faithful. The Báb's declaration was considered blasphemous and he was eventually sentenced to death.

While it is universally known and embraced by all Muslims that The Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad in its most pristine, perfect and final form, some scholars from the Bahá'í faith believe otherwise. For believers of the Bahá'í faith, verses from the Qur'an can be interpreted differently and thus provide an alternative meaning. It is through these alternative interpretations that the Bahá'í faith was based upon.

Following The Báb's execution, one of his followers who similarly experienced persecution and imprisonment had a revelation while being incarcerated. He claimed to be the prophet that The Báb had previously announced to arrive, and with his declaration to being the pre-ordained prophet, he took upon the name Bahá'u'lláh, which translates to "Glory of God". Thus, the Bahá'í faith was officially founded by Bahá'u'lláh who spent the rest of his life being hounded by persecution that brought to him to Acre, where the key Bahá'í Scripture *Kitab-i-Aqdas* was written along with other spiritual writings. It was in Acre where the Bahá'u'lláh died in 1892.

Bahá'u'lláh's successor Abdu'l-Bahá dedicated his life in propagating Bahá'í teachings, and beginning 1908, the faith had a significant exposure in many countries around the world. Significant communities from Europe and North America started to thrive following Abdu'l-Bahá's dedicated effort, which included a thorough development of Bahá'í beliefs with ideas of social reform and universal justice by way of his writings, to name a few.

Abdu'l-Bahá's death in 1921 paved the way for the rise of Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'í leadership. Being

the eldest grandson of Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi likewise was as prolific as his grandfather in the promulgation of Bahá'í faith. Shoghi Effendi was most known for the proliferation of Bahá'í shrines in Israel, as well as the development of the otherwise progressive Bahá'í philosophy, until his death in 1957.

Following Shoghi Effendi's death, the Bahá'í faithful elected to give leadership to a group of capable followers, as opposed to having the reins of the Bahá'í faith being controlled by an individual leader. What is now known as the Universal House of Justice occupies the seat of leadership of present day Bahá'í faith.

Unfazed with the continuous persecution from traditional Muslims in Iran where ironically the faith traces its roots, the Bahá'í faithful continues to be propagated worldwide with much zeal and dedication, and its penetration of the third world made it one of the fastest growing faith in the world after Christianity [17].

Three fundamental principles govern the Bahá'í faithful namely: oneness of God, oneness of religion, and oneness of mankind, or this fundamental unity of all faithful regardless of religious beliefs [5]. Also referred to as the unity of God, religion and mankind, or the "three onenesses", the triumvirate formed the principal core of the Bahá'í religion. Bahá'í doctrines explained the "three onenesses" as such: that there is no other god but God, who constantly reminds one humanity of one religion through a series of prophets or messengers. It is worth noting that stipulated within this core belief is the fundamental concept that "one humanity" refers to the whole of mankind, notwithstanding race or culture. The core belief of one all-powerful God revealing his messages in an up-to-date fashion through a series of messengers or educators explains Bahá'í faithful's respect for other people who may have other religious beliefs. It is important to note that this core belief of Bahá'í faith bears semblance to traditional Muslim belief of respecting people of different faith that they may likewise respect God, or The Supreme Being Muslims refer to as Allah, the Arabic name for The All Powerful Creator. The Bahá'í faith's core teaching of giving high regard to other religious beliefs paved the way for global acceptance, making it the second most-propagated religion worldwide [18].

**2. Gender Equality Manifested in the Selections.** The Bahá'í faith's core principles revolve around the central theme of unity, while augmented by

other principles as endorsed by the faith's governing council, the Universal House of Justice (UHJ) (2008) [19]. The UHJ enumerates other fundamental concepts such as the need for a universal compulsory education, a universal auxiliary language to supplement one's own native tongue, universal peace, harmony of science and religion, and the equality of men and women.

In line with the fact that men and women are recognized as having different capabilities that afford them the sensibilities and abilities to fulfill diverse roles, it is notable that some Bahá'í teachings paid respect to this diversity, and thus, gave preference to gender-assigned roles. However, it is essential to understand that the Bahá'í faith affirms the equality of women to men, notwithstanding differences in capabilities in fulfilling different roles, as it is in the Bahá'í faith's recognition of women to be able to fulfill their roles that prove its affirmation to this said equality [20].

The Bahá'í faith recognizes the equality of men and women as essential moral and spiritual standards in promotion of better individuals, families, and communities, all of which are necessary for world order and the unification of humanity. In *Bahá'í Faith and Gender Equality*, Bahá'u'lláh dissolved the distinction between man and woman as spiritual stations. Likewise, Abdu'l-Bahá likened men and women to a bird's two wings, both of which must flap in unison in order for it to achieve flight and reach its destination, which he then compared to mankind's progress.

In essence, Abdu'l-Bahá affirms the Bahá'í faith's adherence to gender equality as moral and spiritual standards necessary for civilization to progress, with respect to man and woman's equal potential for the necessary intelligence and virtue and the underlying equality of roles toward progress and world order.

As previously stated, the Bahá'í faith stands by the completeness of equality of men and women. However, it is noteworthy that in other aspects of life, Bahá'í principles likewise respects the distinction of either gender's capabilities and potential, thus enabling them to fulfill different but complementing roles. Thus, some Bahá'í teachings may be interpreted as favoring one gender over another in terms of duties, like for example the biological capacity of women to give birth, their innate motherly instincts and role as a child's teacher, hence the Bahá'í faith's stand on prioritizing women's education. The same principle

was applied in Bahá'í faith in welcoming both men and women in all positions with the exception of the governing council of the Universal House of Justice, where the leadership is deemed, at present, exclusively for males. Abdu'l-Bahá gave no clear explanation for this preference and stated that the rationale for such preference will soon be explained, in God's own time.

The Bahá'í faith's recognition of the distinction between men and women in terms of roles and capabilities do not contradict the concept of equality between sexes. In essence, this level of recognition of abilities reflect the faith's respect for equal capabilities, and thus is in congruence with the fundamental principle of gender equality as explicitly declared in Bahá'u'lláh's works, as well as in the discourses and works of his son Abdu'l-Bahá, whose visions of the concept of gender equality being implemented at a practical level as being beneficial to community life [21]. Furthermore, the Bahá'í faith contends that the male is never in any way superior to female, and that it should be maintained in all aspects of the social order [22]. The Bahá'í faith contends that gender equality has long since been overlooked leading to the female population being unable to reach full potential. The religion also maintains that the reason for women's failure to attain an equal social standing with men is due to the inadequate opportunities allowed by the male to their female counterparts, even exploiting the men's advantage in terms of physical strength to prevent women from reaching their full potential and equal role in society.

Bahá'u'lláh was known to reiterate the dissolution of the distinction of either gender as spiritual stations and claims equality of both sexes in God's eyes [20], stating that it was God who dissolved the differences and thus established complete harmony among men and women, ranking both sexes on the same level or plane. Bahá'u'lláh [23], as cited from a tablet-translated from Arabic and Persian, specifically referred to the distinction between God's servants and handmaids as having been removed by His Divine Hands as decreed by Him. He further stated that the spiritual state of both men and women are dependent on their level of devotion to God and even claimed that women who have exemplified lives of higher devotion to God as compared to men are in theory, spiritually exalted and noted by God's pen as excelling over men who may have served in the battlefield. Thus, from the same translated tablet, Bahá'u'lláh

stated that the Bahá'í faith holds high regard for women's role as spiritual stalwarts.

In the same light, Bahá'u'lláh's son Abdu'l-Bahá shared the same stance, as seen in his writings about gender equality and the dependence of either gender's spiritual stations on the level of devotion to God. He referred to his father's sixth teaching concerning gender equality and in his father's declaration that God's non-distinction between sexes translates to God's acceptance of one who serves with a heart most pure and in utter devotion to Him, regardless of gender [11]. Abdu'l-Bahá added that all humans were made in God's own image, and hence share equal potential for intelligence, prowess and virtue [20]. Furthermore, he cited in a certain passage that women of the Bahá'í faith are accounted for in the same level as their male counterparts, bereft of distinction from a spiritual perspective, and many times over even proved superior to men in terms of spiritual devotion [24]. He stood firm in his claim in one of his speeches that it is upon God's Divine justice to demand upon equal respect for both sexes, with neither sex being over or under another, and that in God's eyes, a person's dignity depends on a soul's devotion, built on purity of heart and luminosity of spirit [25].

Abdu'l-Bahá claimed that the ideological struggle for gender equality does not dwell on the correction of historical injustices against women in the social and cultural level. However, he asserted that these should be considered as key motivating factors in pushing for changes in the social structure that should promote a development of the female qualities to be of equal footing to the masculine attributes [20]. He referred to Bahá'í writings that stated that civilization will not be able to attain full progress if women's equal stature to men are not recognized and even alluded to male and female as two wings of a bird, and to both hands of a human being, with either of his analogies further strengthening his claim that man and woman should be equally strong and capable to carry humanity toward advancement. He added that until both worlds (referring to men and women) achieve equality in acquired virtues and attained perfection, success can never be attained in its true form [24]. That the human world is like a bird that is composed of two wings, one wing represents man, and the other represents woman, is but one of Abdu'l-Bahá's allusions to gender equality. He solidified his point in stating that until women achieve the same degree of stature as men, the world, as a bird, cannot successfully fly to

new heights [11]. Gender equality according to Abdu'l-Bahá, refers to equality in the sense of one part being distinct in attribute but at the same time complementing its counterpart. If either part, by virtue, is unable to attain perfection, then the same applies to the whole unit as formed by both parts - imperfect. In addition, if one part points to another as incapable, it is but a reflection of that part's inability to compensate for its counterpart's misgivings, as well as that part's inability to help the incapable part to attain perfection, thus, he himself, therefore is imperfect. To Abdu'l-Bahá (2012) [11], this level of imperfection is not the natural course of humanity. He claimed that the world's happiness is, in theory, dependent on the development of both men and women, both being underdeveloped, both in need of perfection.

It is important to understand that the Bahá'í faith recognizes that the reason for the female population being unable to enjoy social equity among men is due to the lack of educational opportunities afforded to them [22]. Abdu'l-Bahá [11] wrote about the equality of rights in education, that women should receive a fair share in privileges of educational advancement, thus enabling them to contribute to society by qualifying and progressing in their own fields of expertise. Bahá'í teachings also give weight to the role of mothers in their children's upbringing, being the first and foremost educators of the youth [26], even giving preference to a female offspring's education over the male offspring in cases when there are limited resources in a household to support both. Abdu'l-Bahá [11] himself wrote about women's education being more important than that of men, woman being a child's trainer from birth. He said that if a child is tutored by an unqualified educator, this level of imperfect learning will bring forth a condition of imperfection throughout generations [24]. Thus, his global perspective explains the Bahá'í faith's stand on women's excellence in the arts and sciences, giving emphasis to the role of women as forbearers of peace in the political sphere [26].

**3. The Implications of Gender Equality on Peace Advocacy.** It was over a hundred years ago when Bahá'u'lláh, founding prophet of the Bahá'í faith gave an important declaration never before heard of in the annals of revealed religion: that man and woman are equal. This declaration to Bahá'u'lláh was not merely a concept, as he himself strove to promote the ideology to be interwoven into the social fabric of the Bahá'í faithful. Regarding gender equality as both a

spiritual and moral standard, he deemed it necessary to be protected by laws decreeing equality in educational standards and rights. To the Bahá'í followers, gender equality is of utmost importance in the attainment of a unified planet and the achievement of global peace and progress. In order to understand the importance of gender equality and the role of women to the Bahá'í faith's vision of an attainable future for mankind, it is necessary to consider their overall principle of gender equality broken down into key steps and analyze the implications of the said fundamental points and their importance to the study of peace education as panacea to 21st century conflicts and challenges. As the Bahá'í faith remained steadfast in pushing for the full socioeconomic development of both sexes, it is vital for this study to enumerate the fundamental concepts that govern gender equality, namely: unity and equality in the family, equality in education and training, women's contributory role in peace, and finally, an equal voice.

The Bahá'í faithful with communities all over the world has, for over a hundred years, pushed for gender equality and accepted this concept as a truth that is essential to the attainment of One Humanity. To the Bahá'ís, humanity is like a bird with two wings, one male and the other female. Humanity would then be unable to fly unless both wings attain equivalence in strength [24]. In this light, it is important for Bahá'í faith to promote gender equality in the basic unit of society: the family [11]. Hence, this fundamental concept of equality has long since been reflected in the Bahá'í tradition, where the process can be gleaned in the spirit of unity fostered in the beginning of family life. Prior to being married, a Bahá'í faithful must first obtain the blessing of both his or her parents, as well as the parents of his or her future spouse. With this, it can be gleaned that in essence, equality is already promoted between future spouses and their families, after which they can then wed and be united in front of God, parents and community, with the simplest of vows that promise to "abide by God's will". Thus, Bahá'í family begins in an aura of God's blessing, parental consent and community acceptance, as man and woman of equal footing and a united stand. This unity and equality further develops within the Bahá'í household, being considered as both man and woman's duty to God to inculcate in their daily lives. From within the Bahá'í household, the virtues that are necessary for the development of the



individual community, country and the whole of mankind must begin in early education.

The Bahá'í stands by the belief that all virtue must be taught and learned within household, and upholds the consideration of family bonds first and foremost, and protects the individual members of the family from transgression within the family. To the Bahá'í, the family should be the bastion of education and the stronghold of unity and equality, one in injury, comfort, honor, and in peace. In essence, the role of peace as panacea to solving conflicts and challenges begins and takes effect in the house of the Bahá'í faithful.

While both father and mother share equal footing in rearing their children, the Bahá'í view the mother's role as humanity's first educator. Thus, every woman must be ready to assure this task. In essence, the Bahá'í perspective puts the education and training of women as equal as men, with consideration to the roles that either of them will assume in the future, thus the Bahá'í stance on considering women's education as more necessary over their physically stronger counterparts. The Bahá'í rationalizes this preference in line with the weight of a mother's role in shaping future minds [11]. The Bahá'ís do not compartmentalize life into secular and religious parts and even upholds faith to be extolled in all aspects of life, including family and social development, and holds with high regard a child's education. It is important that only in consideration of a female child's future role as mother and also the family's to inadequacy of resources to support all their offspring's education, that the female offspring is given preference. Under favorable circumstances, the Bahá'í upholds a child's education as compulsory, regardless of gender [11], as Bahá'u'lláh himself pushed for the equality in the educational courses to be offered to both men and women, and promoted unity of both genders by lobbying for a unified curriculum for all. In this regard, it can be gleaned that the Bahá'í faith promoted gender equality in education and training as an important step in resolving future conflicts.

The Bahá'í faith highly regards gender equality and its role in the attainment of peace and thus puts this huge responsibility upon the consciousness of all women. While the men share equal responsibility in assuring the equal opportunity for the women and protecting their rights, it is primarily upon the women themselves to recognize their personal responsibility to make each and every effort toward her personal

development [25]. As proof, the Bahá'í communities have taken necessary steps to abolish gender based prejudice, as all forms of oppression are viewed by the Bahá'ís as divisive, marginalizing and therefore, counter-productive. Bahá'í teachings clearly paved the way for women to be on equal footing, as gleaned in the passage conveyed by Abdu'l-Bahá himself who said that if women are prevented from reaching full potential, men will likewise be unable to obtain their own greatness [25].

Abdu'l-Bahá asserted that this fact of gender inequality has long since hounded mankind, and attributed gender inequality to ignorance. He recognized the inadequacy of women to step up to the global platform as due to the lack of equal opportunity afforded to them. Thus, it can be understood that upon recognition of such inequity, he extolled the message of gender equality and supplemented it with spiritual teachings that directly infer God's will of mankind - being able to finally abolish the line that attempts to sever the otherwise strong bond between man and woman [11]. The Bahá'í system of administration similarly exemplified this concept of an equal voice for women, as can be seen in the promulgation of the concept of unity within the Bahá'ís' diversity of gender-specific roles. Education is compulsory, and it is likewise stipulated that previous victims of transgression and deprivation of rights should immediately be arranged to be assimilated into the system. The same can be said for the electoral system of the Bahá'ís, who welcome universal participation from all ranks, devoid of the politics of electioneering and partisanship as every adult is deemed eligible to run for both local or national administrative positions that oversee all Bahá'í affairs.

The Bahá'í faith considered the contributory role of women to the attainment of peace and thus promised the inclusion of the female populace into all aspects of social roles. It regarded their promise as irrevocable and supported it with the strong statement that no movement will even be possible with the women lagging behind men, and more importantly that war will eventually cease upon participation of the women in all world affairs [11].

The Bahai teachings have considered humanity as being inefficient in the attainment of progress and world peace because of lack of an equal and limited effort by both men and women. Consequential conflicts and wars as a result even further blurred visions of hope and world peace. Hence, the Bahá'í

faith's stance on gender equality takes full swing upon the realization of the female role as the missing link towards the abolition of wars and armed struggles, and the restoration of global order. Woman is considered in Bahá'í teachings as the greatest factor in the attainment of universal peace by way of their arbitrary participation in international affairs [11].

It is important to understand that both Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá defended gender equality in terms of its importance as a contributing factor to a united world, the cessation of war, and the achievement of world peace. Bahá'u'lláh himself wrote that equality between sexes is a must, a prerequisite, for the attainment of peace. In similar fashion, Abdu'l-Bahá stated the role of woman in the attainment of peace, and gave the basic example of a mother generally having a firm stand against sending her children to battle [20]. Abdu'l-Bahá also gave emphasis to the role of women's education in the abolition of wars, and that once women attain vital positions of power and fully exercise their motherly virtues on world affairs, then mankind will be able to see a cessation of bloodshed. He contended that women will be the greatest factors in international affairs, paving way for the removal of war as an option in settling disputes, and thus, in the attainment of world peace [11].

In line with the aforesaid Bahá'í stance upheld by both Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá, Momen [27] likewise wrote about achieving gender equality, not in the manner of women having to assume the role of men, but in society being able to recognize and give value to women's attributes and contributions, in order for the women's role to have a direct implication in the pursuit for universal peace. It can therefore be gleaned in Bahá'í teachings that the Bahá'í faith recognizes the contributory role of the female in abolishing warfare and the establishment of peace.

As of the present time, the global community of Bahá'í Religion has a demographic span that proudly includes over 200 countries wherein men and women share equal voices in rebuilding society in a global perspective. The Bahá'ís attribute this clearer vision of a future wherein women share an equal voice with men to Bahá'u'lláh himself, who pushed for the eradication of all hindrances that prevent the attainment of human development.

It is important to note that the Bahá'í prophet himself attested to the duty of humanity to be able to discover, nurture and protect the capacity of women, such it can be gleaned in this regard that the Bahá'í

faith can continue to promote its belief in the equality of the female voice and in essence, gender equality, as panacea to conflicts in all levels, be it personal, family, community, national, and even in the global scale.

#### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Bahá'í Faith was founded in Iran in the mid-19th century by Mirza Hoseyn 'Ali Nuri, who is known as Bahá'u'lláh and has its roots in Shi'ite Islam. The Bahá'í religion's core principles of One God, One faith, and One humanity are supplemented with other guiding principles, and one of those is gender equality. Bahá'ís believe this equality must be manifested as a social reality and as an indispensable element in the creation of a peaceful world. Thus, the Baha'i Faith firmly upholds the principle of the equality of women and men and equal participation of women in all areas of human endeavor to attain world peace.

In this light, the researcher offers the following recommendations: that educators consider this study as a starting point in learning about the role of religion, with the Bahá'í faith as example, in the advancement of humanity through spirituality, with the teachings of gender equality as clear example of the faith's successful approach; that spiritual and religious leaders may consider this study as key reference point for a more-thorough evaluation of the template of spiritual and moral success attained by the Bahá'í faith; that this study may provide literature scholars additional knowledge about the Bahá'í faith followers' assertion that no other world religion has been quite as unequivocal as the Bahá'í faith in its support of the principle of gender equality; and that future researchers may likewise consider this study as a pedagogical reference that may inspire a more-in depth and thorough research which may in the future be aimed to further substantiate this study.

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